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Beyond Removal, Toward Repair: An Assessment of Restorative Justice and Gentrification Prevention in Reconnecting Communities Pilot Projects



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Issue

In the United States, freeway construction and development has often been promoted as a way to boost regional connectivity and economic growth. These promised gains tend to come at great cost to low-income communities of color, including widespread displacement and disinvestment, and disproportionate exposure to freeway-related health impacts. Spatial inequities driven by discriminatory housing and planning practices like redlining and urban renewal exacerbate these outcomes, eroding neighborhood cohesion and reducing economic mobility. The legacy of harm continues to affect both those who were displaced by freeways and the communities of color still living in those neighborhoods.

The Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Program and Justice40, two federal initiatives to fund projects to repair communities divided by structural injustices, represent a turning point in acknowledging these harms. However, the ability of these projects to meaningfully reverse, or even mitigate, the damage remains uncertain. It is still too early to determine the impacts, but early implementation reveals inconsistencies in how restorative justice is interpreted and applied, necessitating the enforcement of stronger safeguards to ensure transformative change.

Many Reconnecting Communities projects build on models developed during the Freeway Revolt era of the 1950s–70s, often replicating approaches seen in earlier efforts like those in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Rochester, New York. These efforts, ranging from freeway removals to lid parks, have shaped contemporary strategies for more equitable, spatial repair.

This study takes a closer look at two California communities: Pasadena and San Diego. Pasadena aims to transform the relinquished state Route 710 Northern Stub into either a series of parks or a civic plaza, while San Diego's Mend the Gap project proposes two freeway lid parks over Interstate 5 to reconnect Barrio Logan and Logan Heights through improved pedestrian and bicycle access. Although these projects incorporate promising community engagement and equity frameworks, major gaps remain in enforceable protections, displacement mitigation, and community governance. Without proper safeguards, efforts risk perpetuating — if not actively contributing — to historical cycles of exclusion under a new banner.

Study Approach

This study evaluated three RCP-funded projects: two in Pasadena and one in San Diego. The research used a mixed-method approach, integrating spatial analysis (including gentrification risk, air quality, vehicle access, and safety indicators) with qualitative evaluation of grant merit criteria to construct a comparative matrix for assessing alignment with restorative justice principles and examining how these goals are translated in planning practice.

Key Findings

- Traditional justice theories, such as the Rawlsian paradigm, fall short in addressing spatialized and structural injustices due to their abstract, ahistorical assumptions of a neutral starting point. More grounded approaches — such as those advanced by Young and Sen — offer stronger foundations

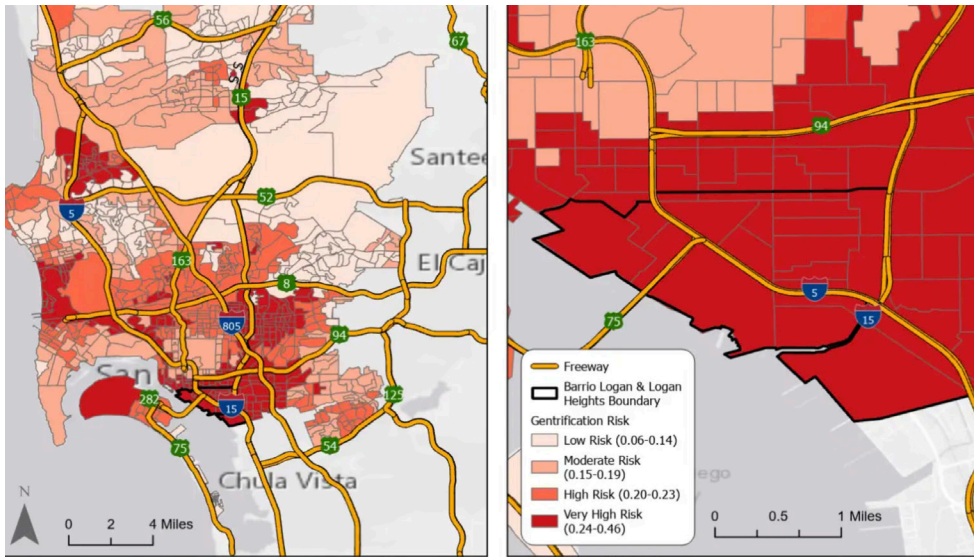


Figure 1. Gentrification Risk Across San Diego

for restorative justice and should inform how equity is conceptualized and implemented in practice.

- Both Pasadena and San Diego’s RCP project areas are at elevated risk of gentrification, highlighting the need for robust affordability protections and community stabilization strategies that advance equity and mitigate displacement (Figure 1).
- Restorative framing varies widely in implementation. While all three case studies acknowledge past harms, only the Pasadena projects detailed anti-displacement measures and community-driven visioning with consistency and breadth, compared to San Diego’s grant application.

Conclusions

- The federal Reconnecting Communities Pilot and Justice40 initiatives have opened new pathways to pursue restorative justice through infrastructure, but good intentions alone do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Projects must integrate enforceable protections to safeguard against gentrification.
- Despite strong narrative commitments, current RCP efforts in Pasadena and San Diego fall short on implementation safeguards, raising concerns that these initiatives may

unintentionally reproduce historic patterns of exclusion. Significant gaps in enforceable anti-displacement protections and limited mechanisms for meaningful community power-sharing inhibits the transformative potential and overall impact of these projects. Planners must produce a new framework.

- Case studies from cities like Rochester, New York, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, reveal both the potential and limitations of freeway removal efforts, emphasizing that outcomes depend heavily on how projects are structured and governed.
- Public sector leadership and grassroots organizations play critical roles in shaping equitable redevelopment. Transparent processes and sustained engagement are necessary to ensure that project outcomes reflect community priorities.
- Bridging the gap between aspirational goals and on-the-ground equity requires more than technical planning; It demands long-term institutional accountability and alignment between community narratives and implementation strategies.



This project is in collaboration with several community stakeholders, government agencies, and University of California partners including the UCLA Center of Neighborhood Knowledge, UC Irvine Department of Public Policy and Urban Planning, UC Berkeley Institute of Urban and Regional Development, and UC Davis Department of Environmental Science and Policy.

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